

Using Digital Literacy to Transform Conflict into Curiosity: Implications for Art Education

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ABSTRACT

This visual narrative illustrates why digital literacy and the term conflict transformation are valuable concepts to address in the secondary level art classroom. The author provides specific activities designed to enhance digital literacy while activating students' curiosities.

KEYWORDS: Digital Literacy, Visual Literacy, Conflict Transformation

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In the following visual narrative (Carpenter and Tavin, 2012; Madrid-Manrique, 2020), I describe why digital literacy and the term conflict transformation are important concepts to address in public schools. I will also present specific activities designed to enhance digital literacy while activating students' curiosities.

What is Digital Literacy and Why is it Important?

Digital literacy is a fluid concept that scholars continually redefine as their understanding of the digital landscape, how literacy is identified, and the relationship between these two factors are rapidly changing. Despite the innate complexities that surround our understanding of digital literacy, I will refer to digital literacy as the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and access to resources that individuals need to succeed in the digital world. This includes locating, evaluating, and using digital information with intention and efficiency as well as creating and communicating information using digital technologies.

Digital literacy, as opposed to the more conventional concept of reading printed text, is essential for thriving in contemporary society. While distinguishing between traditional offline reading and new literacy, scholars point out that digital literacy involves assuming the roles of investigator, author, and editor rather than just the reader (Barone, 2021; Castek et al., 2015; Coiro, 2003; Coiro, 2021; Hammerberg, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; RAND, 2002). This requires a significant increase of cognitive energy as readers must identify relevant search terms, vet a webpage's reliability, and cross-reference multiple sources in order to locate the information they are seeking.



Furthermore, the way that members of contemporary society receive information has dramatically shifted over the past two decades. The digital world requires additional critical lenses, complicating the ease with which we acquire and analyze information. For example, Hobbs (2017) describes how algorithmic personalization "uses data from the behaviors, beliefs, interests, and emotions of the target audience to provide filtered digital content, targeted advertising, and differential product pricing to online users" (p. 521). In other words, algorithms that track our digital presence intentionally curate the information and advertisements that appear in our online pursuits. Studies have shown that online search results will differ for each individual because these results depend on what the internet knows about the person conducting the research (Hobbs, 2017).

Art educators are well-aware that digital images can be easily manipulated. Altering a digital image no longer requires expertise using Adobe Photoshop or other sophisticated software. Advances in technology now enable users to manipulate imagery on their smart phones with free applications or tools built into their phone's camera. Videos can also be edited more easily with intuitive technology designed for the common user rather than a trained video editor. These advances in technology allow art teachers to incorporate digital image manipulation into their curriculum without relying on expensive hardware and software.

What is Conflict Transformation and Why is it Important?

As shown, the way that people make meaning from the digital information they encounter differs from traditional offline reading of published texts. This involves knowledge, skills, and behaviors that require educators' attention in order to prepare future generations to be productive contributors to a contemporary, democratic society rather than passive victims of profit and power-seeking forces that influence the way information is disseminated in the digital world.



Based on the work of J.P. Lederach (1995), conflict transformation refers to handling opposition with optimism. Rather than trying to eliminate or control conflict, conflict transformation involves recognizing conflicts as opportunities for personal growth. This broad concept relates to nearly every area of life and can be applied to multiple disciplinary fields. However, for the purpose of this visual narrative, I will describe how conflict transformation relates to allowing information that conflicts with our existing understanding to activate our curiosity and imagination. More specifically, we will explore how digital literacy practices can provide opportunities for conflict transformation to occur while strategically engaging with online content.

Scholars have recently emphasized that civil discourse is a key component of a healthy democracy (Journell, 2019; Lee, 2018; Noddings & Brooks, 2017; Steyer, 2020; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). This involves the ability to engage in respectful dialogues with those who hold opinions and perspectives that differ from our own. Zimmerman and Robertson remind us that well-informed individuals often disagree on controversial topics and experts must routinely and respectfully deliberate unresolved questions. Although it may not always be easy, activating the ability to sincerely consider other points of view promotes intellectual character and curiosity. More specifically, discussing controversial issues that stem from differences in moral judgements are often the most difficult to address because consulting expert authorities on moral issues is problematic. Instead, individuals should critically evaluate the origin of their belief systems and recognize how discussions with those who hold different beliefs can enhance the quality of their moral judgements (Zimmerman & Roberts, 2017). Noddings & Brooks highlight that democratic communities are dedicated to continual self-improvement. Rather than simply perpetuating its existing customs, democratic communities should aim to sustain healthy qualities and suggest ways to improve less desirable traits. This involves embracing opportunities to refine our current perspectives by deliberately considering why others hold different points of view (Noddings & Brooks, 2017).

While preparing to facilitate discussions on potentially controversial topics with students, teachers should determine how to establish and enforce ground rules that support a safe, respectful learning environment. Setting up these expectations from the beginning will provide a point of reference to guide students' interactions. When prompted with, "What ground rules should teachers establish when facilitating difficult discussions with students?" the Gemini-generated text provided a helpful list for teachers to adapt to suit the context of their classroom (OpenAI, 2024; see https://drive.google.com/file/d/1F1Gtar37h13U6eZnPUMnz_W0iGv84YB/view?usp=sharing for full transcript).

Informed by both lived experiences and the collective wisdom generated by research, people commonly recognize how the information we receive through various media channels and the way that we process this information is rapidly changing. Exposure to reasonable perspectives that contradict our own diminishes as technology and social media perpetuate a distorted version of reality based on what we want to see and believe is true. This promotes the polarization of societies as individuals restrict their sources of information to media that support their existing point of view. Therefore, activating a conflict transformation mindset positions individuals to embrace discomfort while recognizing the learning potential generated from experiencing cognitive dissonance. Addressing this topic provides opportunities for students to explore how uncertainty can breed a sense of curiosity that welcomes complexity rather than seeking simple truths.



How Can Art Teachers Support Digital Literacy and Conflict Transformation?

Teachers can model and support the attitudes and behaviors that support conflict transformation. When encountering a perspective that differs from our own, we must not only acknowledge the personal life experiences that have influenced our beliefs, but also respectfully consider how contextual circumstances have shaped another person's point of view. This is one way that encountering difference can stimulate curiosity. Rather than avoiding this conflict, intentionally listening to an opposing perspective and trying to understand why they see an issue differently can activate a pleasurable feeling of intellectual inquiry. In addition, resisting the impulse to immediately reject ideas that challenge our sense of truth involves strengthening our self-control, a character trait that will benefit other areas of social and emotional well-being. Carefully listening to the reasoning supporting another viewpoint not only helps us to empathize with others but can also open our eyes to new questions that might inspire intellectual and creative growth.



The following activities are designed to promote digital literacy while activating students' curiosities.

Instructional Strategies and Activities

Curiosity Activity #1: What is the Source and Purpose? ¹

When encountering online information that both supports or conflicts with our existing point of view, it's important to critically question the content's source and intended purpose to avoid believing misleading information. In order to identify and better understand how and why facts are presented inaccurately online, Hobbs (2017) provides a helpful infographic that divides misleading information into ten categories and provides the defining characteristics that distinguish each. These categories include: propaganda, clickbait, sponsored content, satire and hoax, error, partisan, conspiracy theory, pseudoscience, misinformation, and bogus news. After viewing the infographic, students can find examples that fit into the different categories and then answer questions such as: Who created this message? Were they creating this message to make money? To inform (or misinform)? As a form of political or social power? As a joke or a form of humor? Or because they truly are passionate about the issue (see para. 13)?

As they further investigate the content of the image, students might respond to questions that address the following four areas:

Technique: What symbols and rhetorical strategies are used to attract attention and activate an emotional response? What makes them effective?

Means of communication and format: How does the message reach people, and what form does it take?

Representation: How does this message portray people and events? What points of view and values are activated?

Audience receptivity: How may people think and feel about the message? How free are they to accept or reject it (see para. 29)?

Extension Art Making Activity:

Using digital tools, students are then challenged to design a propaganda tool that communicates an opposing point of view on one of the topics. They should identify the target audience and describe how their content and composition choices might effectively persuade this audience.

Curiosity Activity #2: How Do Media Sources Use Images Strategically? ²

Students review the media bias chart provided at allsides.com ("AllSides media bias chart," n.d.) that ranks common media outlets by their degree of political bias. Students collectively or independently determine one or more current, controversial topic(s) and locate several images on different media websites that portray a different perspective on the topic. Students use visual analysis strategies to describe how each image might communicate a different message based on its content and composition. As shown in the example provided, these visual analysis strategies involve responding to specific questions in the following categories: context, content, message and interpretation, and critical thinking. Students will identify the target audience, compare and contrast the visual characteristics shown, and speculate on why these choices are appropriate for their target audience.

Curiosity Activity #3: What are They Thinking? ³

Exercising conflict transformation often involves trying to understand what causes people to hold beliefs that conflict with their own. This activity allows students to imagine various ways that people might interpret the situation shown in a given image. Students, either independently or in pairs, locate an image that relates to a current controversial topic. Each student creates a thought bubble that shows what one of the people in the image might be thinking at that moment. This can be done using digital tools or with physical paper. Students contribute this to the class's collection, select a different image, and create a thought bubble for a different character in the image. Students submit this new contribution and select a different image. This time, they are challenged to generate a thought bubble for a character that shows a different perspective than the one currently shown. Finally, students view the entire class collection of images with corresponding thought bubbles and participate in a reflective discussion.

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Endnotes

- ¹ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HcH_M-BKfH6Rit800ys8dlyK32CueBz/edit?pli=1
- ² <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PtlmEuy3YjpkAqOZM8JkZDuy11JgZl/edit>
- ³ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/12Fy017v8PEN23a7n6G76jdmhKkL55U/edit>